

# *Aboriginal Education at Two Australian Schools*

## **UNDER ONE DREAM**

Donald F. Hones

*Reflections in the water I see  
Black and white living together  
Sharing dreams of the red, black and gold*  
—Yothu Yindi (1999)

The countryside around Cherbourg, Australia, is low and rolling, sparsely wooded, with fields dotted with cattle and one or two emu farms. Horses roam freely along the road to the processing plant, where goat meat is prepared to Muslim specifications, to be shipped to the Middle East. Cherbourg itself, with a population of 2,000, is an Aboriginal community that was forcibly created about one hundred years ago by the state, in an attempt to gather together disparate tribal groups of the "dying race" and educate their members to become servants to the Whites (Blake, 2001).

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The town of Cherbourg features such local attractions as the Bora Ring Café, the 4 Us Mob Radio station, senior and youth centers, police station and jail. The potential site for a technology hub, where community members could learn and use technology currently being piloted in the school, is a semi-abandoned storefront currently covered with Aboriginal art and graffiti. Several small dogs roam about the dusty streets, seeming very much at home.

Arriving at Cherbourg State School, I find the principal speaking in the library, where he is congratulating students on recent successes in state competitions. Chris Sarra stands in front of a few dozen students seated on the floor. He is dressed in hiking boots, gray shorts, and a whitish-gray "Cherbourg Hornets" shirt with a small Aboriginal flag on the right front pocket. Along the shirt collar is the motto, "Strong and Smart." He is of medium height, powerfully-built, light brown skin, short black hair, and dark eyes alight with an inner fire as he speaks in cadences that would make a Baptist preacher proud:

*Chris: We've got to keep moving for-*

ward. Are you proud to be black?  
*Students: YES!* (the children respond so loudly that many have to plug their ears)

*Chris: Are you proud to be part of the oldest civilization on this continent?*  
*Students: YES!*

*Chris: Do you know where we are? We are at a place where black kids have not been before. What are we?*  
*Students: STRONG AND SMART!*

In November of 2003, with travel support from the U.S. Department of Education, I had the opportunity to visit two schools that serve Aboriginal children in the state of Queensland, Australia: Cherbourg State School in central Queensland, and Kuranda State School in the Far North. Prior to my visit I had learned somewhat of Australia's troubled history regarding Aboriginal education, a history that has included attempts to eradicate entire cultures and languages through forcible removal from traditional lands, removal of children from parents, and severe punishments for speaking native languages (Schmidt, 1993).

I had learned of the reforms of the Whitlam Labor government in the 1970s which encouraged the development of bilingual education programs in Aboriginal communities, and of the more recent federal decisions to halt support for such programs (Schmidt, 1993; Lo Bianco & Rhydwen, 2001). I was eager to see for myself schools where Aboriginal cultures were honored and where Aboriginal languages were part of the curriculum.

### From Stolen Generation to Strong and Smart: Cherbourg State School

The story of Aboriginal children taken from their families, relocated to far-off schools, and forced to drop their culture and speak only English, is recounted poignantly in Doris Pilkington Garimara's *Follow the Rabbit Proof Fence* (1994) and the award-winning movie based on her book. This story of children forcibly removed was repeated throughout Australia during the first half of the Twentieth Century, resulting in the creation of a *stolen generation*, bereft of their ties to traditional communities.

The history of the mission at Cherbourg has been told (Blake, 2001; Hegarty, 1999) and the recent success of Cherbourg State School has been documented by Mark Newman (2003). The original settlement, mirroring broader Australian policies towards Aboriginal peoples, had the twin goals of breaking down native cultures and creating a subservient class of workers for the whites:

One of the primary functions of the settlement was to inculcate the inmates with 'civilised' values by destroying their cultural roots. It was hoped that with a 'limited amount of civilisation' they might in time become incorporated into European society, albeit at the lowest level. (Blake, 2001: 236)

Ruth Hegarty provides a glimpse of how this state system worked on individual children and families in her description of the day her mother was compelled to leave her at Cherbourg:

'Ruth, I'm going to be sent out to work.'...I remember being very angry. Would this mean I'd never see her again? What I later discovered was that all of the mothers who were in the dormitory and separated from their children were required to go out to work to repay their 'debt' to the government. I guess it was time for Mum to repay our debt. (Hegarty, 1999: 30)

The separation from their ancestral land, the forced removal of children from their families, and the severe punishment for speaking native languages had a profound psychological effect on inmates at Cherbourg. However, in the bringing together of people, even under difficult circumstances, something new was created:

The government thought they would disband the different tribes by splitting them up around all the different reserves, but they didn't realize that they were creating one big tribe. (Kathy Fisher, former inmate, quoted in Blake, 2001, p. 197)

A few years ago, Chris Sarra became the first Aboriginal principal of Cherbourg State School. He inherited a school with tremendous absenteeism, low-performing students, a school set in a community that in many ways was still recovering from generations of government efforts to break up families and groups.

His mission is to provide Aboriginal children with an excellent education and a direction for their lives. This is the spirit of his Strong and Smart philosophy: Smart, meaning that children will achieve up to and beyond government measures; and Strong in their sense of self, in being Black, in their roots in one of the world's most ancient cultures:

When I came to the school, the kids were

lifeless; there was just a dull look about them. It is because they had been sold short for such a long time. When I came in, the first thing I said to them on parade was, "The most important thing that you will learn from me is that you can be successful and you can be Aboriginal." With that we got right to the core of the kids and their identity and the lights have gone on, and it is like their spirit is being stimulated.

The school is made up of a plain, two-story building and 3 or 4 smaller outbuildings. The grounds are bare and dusty, with a few small trees. Children and stray dogs move among the classrooms. Yet, the limited architecture is enhanced with beautiful murals that grace the sides of the buildings: There are rainbow snakes, kangaroos, turtles, hand prints, and other traditional motifs of Aboriginal art. There are vibrant colors of red, orange, yellow, black, and green, the colors of the Australian landscape. Words accompany the pictures on the wall next to the basketball court: "Safety-Respect-Learning—Cooperation," and "Strong and Smart."

I visit some of the classrooms where literacy instruction is taking place. In a smaller, separate building, I meet the instructor for art, dance, and Aboriginal culture. Most of his students are away performing in a nearby town. I talk with a grandparent, who also attended this school, and her grandchild, who sit in the shade under the main building. The pride she feels in her granddaughter, in the teachers, and in the school is palpable.

Several children race up in homemade billycarts, and they are happy to pose for a few photos. They are many shades of brown, their hair varies from dark blond to black, but they share the same bright eyes and wide smiles. Out front, on the street side, a grafitti-filled sign proclaims "Cherbourg State School." Nearby, large letters containing smaller murals spell out "STRONG AND SMART."

# Cherbourg State School



Mural



Chris Sarra, Principal  
of Cherbourg State School



Playground Mural, Cherbourg  
State School

One of Chris Sarra's first priorities at the school was to improve attendance:

Kids would drift in at 9:20 in the morning, and if they liked what they saw, they would stay, if they didn't they would cruise out. By the afternoon they would be down to about three or four kids from a class of 25. The next day you would see 8-10 kids in the morning, but a different 8-10 from the day before. We challenged kids about being strong and smart. We challenged their behavior in relation to how they saw themselves as strong and smart and how they connected to attendance at school, and in fact everything that has got to do with school life. We had a 94% improvement (in attendance) within 18 months.

Sarra also challenged the teachers at Cherbourg to have high expectations for all of the children at the school:

What is it that we are doing that is contributing to this abysmal level of underachievement? It was at a point where I had to flush out the staff that I had inherited. I said to them in the staffroom here: "What I believe is that our children can leave here strong and smart, and with academic outcomes that are comparable to any other school, where our Grade sevens can leave having done Grade 7 work, and be confident and strong. If you don't truly believe that, then you have to get out." And half the teaching staff got up and left. That was a positive thing, because from then on, I had established a new team that believed in the mission that we had and the results have followed. It was a matter of getting down to hard work, building relationships with kids, getting on with the mechanics of literacy.

The school plans to add grades 8 and 9 in order to get students better prepared for high school in a neighboring town, where Sarra knows they could be subjugated to the low expectations that have traditionally plagued Aboriginal students:

We lose them a little bit too early, when they are starting to form their own iden-

tity as young men or young women. We will keep building the strong and smart profile through that, then they will go to high school and they will survive. They will look at White kids in the eye, and they will say, "Look, I'm here. I came to study and to work hard. If you want to try to put me down with your racism, I'm not going to be affected by that. It's your problem, you work it out for yourself." These kids are tough. They are strong in a strength that no other kid can have. That is coming from the land, facing up to adversity, and taking it on.

### Indigenous Languages: Recuperating Djabugay at Kuranda State School

It is estimated that 250 different languages were spoken in Australia and the Torres Islands when Europeans first arrived to the continent. Fully two-thirds of those languages are no longer actively used, and of the remainder, many have fewer than 10 speakers each (National Board of Employment, Education, and Training, 1996). Lo Bianco and Rhydwen (2001) juxtapose a dire view of language survival with hope founded in community efforts:

The signs apparently indicate that most [Aboriginal languages] are beyond saving. Yet despite the chances of survival being negligible, there is a vast community based effort to keep languages alive. (Lo Bianco & Rhydwen, 2001, p. 396)

About 44,000 people spoke an Australian Indigenous language or an Australian creole (a language developed from pidgin English) in the home in 1996. Speakers of these languages made up 14% of Indigenous people and 0.3% of the Australian population. Some 64% of Indigenous people in the Northern Territory spoke an Indigenous language or Creole at home. The two Indigenous languages with the most speakers were Arrente, a central Australian language (3,468 speakers), and

Dhuwal-Dhuwala, an Arnhem land language (3,219 speakers) (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2001).

In the far north of Queensland, in the hills above Cairns, I was able to visit a school where a traditional Aboriginal language is taught to all students, irrespective of their heritage. The village of Kuranda lies within a tropical rainforest. Small forest kangaroos, endangered frogs, deadly spiders and wasps, and other creatures can be found within a few hundred meters of the village, and freshwater crocodiles lounge on the banks of the river. Morning under the canopy of trees brings the gentle songs of tropical birds.

The village of Kuranda draws a multitude of daily tour groups to its crafts markets and serene natural surroundings. Stands of colorfully painted didjeridoos adorn the sidewalks outside of traditional music stores, and Aboriginal art can also be seen in a colorful wall mural featuring two kangaroos on the main street. Not far from the center of the village is Kuranda State School, which looks out over the misty, forested hills and the arriving cable cars of the Kuranda Sky Tram. The school sports the yellow sun on a field of red and black, the Aboriginal flag, flying alongside the Australian flag. Inside, children learn the traditional language of the region, Djabugay, in their Language Other Than English program.

Members of the Djabugay tribe were forcibly relocated to the Mona Mona mission at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Children were removed from parents, becoming inmates in dormitories and a school where the speaking of Djabugay would be punished severely. However, a few speakers of the language survived, including those who, rather than go to school, hid in the forest. In 1987 a group of linguists, artists, and community members began to revive the language and culture. The Creation Theatre was formed, and this has introduced a wider, Euro-Australian audience



"Strong and Smart" Mural,  
Cherbourg State School

## Kuranda State School



Mural



Australian (out of frame),  
Queensland, & Aboriginal Flags

to Djabugay traditions. The language itself is also taught at Kuranda State School and Kuranda State High School (Tjapukai Language, 2003).

The demographics at Kuranda State School are about 40% Murri (Queensland Aboriginal) and 60% Euro-Australian. Interestingly, the teacher at the schools is an Englishman who has learned the language, with the help of elders. Working together with elders and students, he has helped produce a variety of Djabugay texts, including a dictionary, traditional stories, songs, and descriptions of local flora and fauna (Quinn, 1992 and 1986). In *Nganydjin Ngirrima Djabugay/Our Djabugay Language* (Quinn, Banning, & McLeod, 1988), the language of Djabugay is connected to the worldview of the people and the rainforest itself:

Djabugay can be seen as a key to understanding the rainforest environment of this part of northern Queensland. The language is a vehicle of a worldview that is based on the careful management and sharing of resources rather than on exploitation and profit. There is seen to be a mystic bond between the individual and the world creative power of Balurru which is ever present in the world and in its creatures, in the land, in the waters and in the heavens above. (Quinn, Banning, & McLeod, 1988:iii)

Teachers at the school have noticed that the adoption of Djabugay culture and words in the curriculum has fostered greater self-esteem among students. Moreover, through innovative uses of distance technology, the students at Kuranda have been able to share their culture and language with students in other states of Australia.

### **Under One Dream: Implications for Indigenous Education**

One comes away from a visit to these

schools feeling renewed. At both Cherbourg and Kuranda, Aboriginal students are finding pride in the traditional cultures of the land, and at Kuranda, all students are relearning a traditional language. For indigenous people everywhere, there are lessons to be learned from the experiences at these schools.

- ◆ Building students' self-esteem begins by valuing their cultural heritage.
- ◆ Promoting students' self-worth goes hand-in-hand with holding them to high expectations.
- ◆ The presence of indigenous administrators and teachers provides students a model of success they can seek to emulate. Non-indigenous administrators and teachers must learn to abide by certain indigenous standards in their work (Agbo, 2002).
- ◆ Incentives are often needed to recover a traditional language. In the case of Djabugay, language recovery includes an economic incentive, as cultural performances have become a new source of income.
- ◆ Members of majority group(s) must engage with the language and culture. This lends the language more legitimacy, and provides another source for common ground. Edward (2003) writes:

It will be in the long-term interests of Australia to encourage non-indigenous children to become familiar with Aboriginal languages so that they, to some extent, will be assimilated to the original cultures of this land, and come to think of them as part of our common heritage. A new and richer idea of what it means to be Australian will develop. (Edward, 2003)

In Australia, in the United States, and elsewhere, all citizens will enjoy a richer heritage when we begin to honor, and learn, the traditional cultures and languages of

the land. Then, perhaps, we can learn to live together, in the words of the songwriters Yothu Yindi, *UNDER ONE DREAM*.

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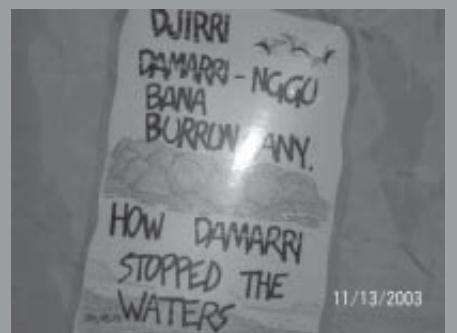
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Mural, Kuranda State School



Djabugay/English Bilingual Books